



A dancer tucks his Apple iPhone next to his traditional Omani dagger during a cultural welcome ceremony outside the Sultan's Palace in Muscat on the second day of a Royal tour of Oman by Prince Charles, Prince of Wales and Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall on November 5, 2016.

Virtual Identity Systems Should Better Support Gulf Nationals

by Sercan Şengün & D. Fox Harrell

The use of online information and communication technologies—such as social media—is especially pervasive in the Gulf states. The UAE is the world leader when it comes to internet usage (99%) and mobile social media access (88%), with the other Gulf states having usage rates that are nearly as high.¹ Qatar leads the region for time spent online with 45 hours per week—far above the 27 hours per week regional average.² Emiratis report spending 60 percent of their online time socializing with family members, and Saudis spend 50 percent of their online time in the same way. Emiratis also spend nearly 33 percent of their online time socializing with friends, as do the same rate of Qataris. One research study cites Qatar as the leading Gulf state when it comes to social media use in the Middle East and North Africa, followed by the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Oman.³ But while Gulf nationals are among the world's most active internet and social media users, virtual identity systems do not adequately reflect their values and cultural norms.

For any user to interact on social media and other online platforms, they must construct virtual identities—creating social media profiles, selecting profile photos and user names, and building gaming avatars.

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These identities enable users to communicate, interact, and express their senses of self—including gender and ethnicity, which are self-representation categories that are highly effective in governing virtual identity construction and online behavior.⁴ In fact, according to our research—which included 18 interviews with people from the Middle East as well as big data analysis

from popular social media applications—the availability of suitable gender and ethnicity options are empirically linked to better user performance and engagement in virtual environments.⁵

Gendered considerations

Many observers—including researchers focusing on the Middle East—might assume that it would predominantly be female users who experience social constraints and tensions while constructing virtual identities. Yet our research shows that male users, particularly younger ones, also negotiate cultural and social limitations. For them, underscoring *khaleeji* identity through regional clothing, beard styles, and cultural imagery is an important consideration when constructing virtual identities. Using profile images with *thobes* and *ghutras*, adopting certain sitting and standing positions, and selecting headshots rather than candid poses reinforce cultural identity and becomes essential for formal connections with elder family members and colleagues. These tactics also help portray modesty—a valued personal trait. These kinds of hegemonically reinforced male representations that must be both formal and modest are seen as crucial for social objectives like business ownership, inter- and intra-family relations, and socio-political status.

But for younger users, there is also a demand for informal presentation among friends and family members of similar age groups. This informal self might involve clothing from outside the local milieu, more candid selfies, and an otherwise relaxed appearance. Many social media and gaming platforms typically fail to provide features for customizing self-representations and tailoring them for different user groups. It is therefore common for Gulf users to own multiple devices (mobile subscriptions are 127 percent of the Gulf region's population) that are logged into separate social media accounts geared toward certain types of connections—for example, an “official” device or account for elder family members and business connections, in addition to another more “anonymous” one for friends and informal connections.

While male users negotiate formality and informality, considerations of modesty and privacy are far more crucial to female users. This is due to the fact that a mix of cultural, social, and religious values have a strong impact on dictating personal appearance, public etiquette, interaction with strangers, and family life—all of which tie back to the regional experience of female identity. Three cultural considerations in particular have been described as having a bearing on privacy and modesty: *awrah*, the intimacy of one's body; *hurma*, the sacredness of certain spaces like homes and mosques; and *haq al-khososyah*, the local laws that protect *hurma*.⁵ While these aspects might narrowly be interpreted as religious prescriptions, they are (like in most places in the world) deeply interwoven culturally. In recent times, they have been regulated varyingly by both state and interpersonal interactions, and not simply guided by religion alone.

To project a contemporary take on modesty, female users (and occasionally males) in the region avoid showing their faces in their profile photos. Thematic photos are often selected and can range from flowers, natural scenes, skylines of Middle Eastern cities, various animals, cars and SUVs, and close-ups where the person's identity cannot be readily determined. Additionally, users frequently choose silhouettes rather

than direct photos—an increasingly common trend for men who want to incorporate some relaxed representations within their formal accounts.

Yet the need for privacy and modesty, coupled with the tensions over formal versus informal presentation, creates issues for Gulf nationals of any gender when it comes to interacting with strangers online. Male users are subject to online bullying and racism,⁶ especially when they emphasize their *khaleeji* identities through photos. Female users often feel the need to consolidate their online interactions in closed social groups—including WhatsApp chats and private Facebook groups. Membership to these groups is strictly moderated, and interactions with strangers are only done on a referral basis—such as a user inviting a close friend to the group.

The lack of diversity in virtual identities

For Gulf nationals, the lack of diverse and empowering *khaleeji* representations in virtual identity systems is a recurrent problem. While some Gulf nationals may believe that a degree of universality is an advantage, all virtual identity representations are culturally grounded (typically with North American and European norms, not “universal” ones).

Users who do not wish to put aside their own cultural backgrounds are viewed as disruptive. In video games or social media that utilize illustrative and cartoonish avatars, few have visual features derived from the diverse and rich array of local Gulf cultures and values. Even those systems that employ limited *khaleeji* representations typically fail to address the diversity within the region—including country-specific *ghutras*, *shaylas*, make-up styles, or beards. Nuanced representations of men and women are also flattened, with male images limited to hyper-masculine and even hostile constructs.⁷

At the language level, many major global platforms and gaming applications also still fail to support the Arabic alphabet—forcing people to type in Arabic using Latin letters. Although this hybrid form of Arabic writing (sometimes called *Arabizi*) may be seen as easier or “cooler” among young users, there is growing alarm and criticism over its effects on the Arabic language.

What system designers can do

Virtual representations of gender and cultural identities reveal a set of challenges, problems, and new phenomena for Gulf users. Yet developers can design systems that support the needs and values of diverse communities and subgroups—both regionally and globally. Much of the inadequacy of such systems could be overcome through consultation, cooperation, and guidance from the members of the relevant local cultures.

As cultural and technological production practices continue to spread transnationally, it is not unrealistic for industries to cater to diverse gender and ethnic communities. In the case of the Gulf region, the high penetration rate of people using applications, social media, video games, and other kinds of virtual environments would especially benefit if platforms and businesses catered to local tastes. Our research underscores the need for virtual systems that empower Middle Eastern users to participate in digital media and online communication in ways that support their own cultural needs and values. Building such empowering systems can support implementing more expressive and nuanced online selves that serve users’ needs in further arenas of life.

II. Analysis

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¹ Simon Kemp, "Digital in 2017 Global Overview," *We Are Social*, January 24, 2017, <https://wearesocial.com/special-reports/digital-in-2017-global-overview>.

² "Media Use in the Middle East, 2017," Survey by Northwestern University, Qatar, 2017, <http://www.mideastmedia.org/survey/2017/>.

³ "Social Media and the Internet of Things," Arab Social Media Report 2017, Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government, <http://www.mbrsg.ae/getattachment/05534635-16f6-497a-b4a3-d06f061bda0b/Arab-Social-Media-Report-2017>.

⁴ D. Fox Harrell, "Computational and Cognitive Infrastructures of Stigma: Empowering Identity in Social Computing and Gaming," *Proceedings of the seventh ACM conference on Creativity and Cognition* (New York: ACM Press, 2009), 49-58.

⁵ D. Fox Harrell, Sarah Vieweg, Haewoon Kwak, Chong U Lim, Sercan Şengün, Ali Jahanian, and Pablo Ortiz, "Culturally-grounded Analysis of Everyday Creativity in Social Media: A Case Study in Qatari Context," *Proceedings of the 2017 ACM SIGCHI Conference on Creativity and Cognition* (New York, ACM Press, 2017), 209-221; Sercan Şengün, "Why do I Fall for the Elf, When I am no Orc Myself? The Implications of Virtual Avatars in Digital Communication," *Comunicação e Sociedade* 27 (2015): 181-193; Various works by Dominic Kao and D. Fox Harrell (i.e., "Exploring the Effects of Dynamic Avatars on Performance and Engagement in Educational Games," in *Games+Learning+Society 2016*; "Toward Avatar Models to Enhance Performance and Engagement in Educational Games," in 2015 IEEE Conference on Computational Intelligence and Games, 2015, 246-253).

⁶ The term "racism" mentioned by interviewees may actually coincide with xenophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment.

⁷ Vít Šisler, "Digital Arabs: Representation in Video Games," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 11, no.2 (2008): 203-220.